

On the syntax of ellipsis: Sluicing and cleft-sluicing in Egyptian Arabic

Sluicing is an elliptical structure that has been claimed to result from wh-fronting and deletion (Ross 1969; Merchant 2001), as in (1).

1) John bought something, but I don't know [what [~~John bought~~]]

Egyptian Arabic (EA), a wh-in-situ language that also allows wh-clefting and wh-fronting under specific conditions, provides support for this correlation between wh-fronting and sluicing. More specifically, this paper argues that EA exhibits genuine sluicing only when wh-fronting is allowed, but cleft-sluicing otherwise. The paper thus contributes to the cross-linguistic study of ellipsis and its syntactic analysis.

EA utilizes multiple strategies to form wh-questions (Wahba 1984). Wh-arguments appear in situ (2), or as pivots of a cleft structure (3), but never fronted (4).

2) shuf-t **miin**? 3) **miin**_i (huwwa) (da) ?illii ?inta shuf-t-uh_i? 4) ***miin**_i shuf-t?
 saw-2SGM who who COP.SGM DEM.SGM COMP you saw-2SGM-him who saw-2SGM
 'Who did you see?' 'Who is it that you saw?'

Bare wh-adjuncts appear in situ (5), or fronted (6); but never as pivots of a cleft structure (7).

5) ha-tsaafir **feen/?imtaa/?izzaay/leeh**? 6) **feen/?imtaa/?izzaay/leeh** ha-tsaafir?
 FUT-travel.2SGM where/when/how/why? where/when/how/why FUT-travel.2SGM
 'Where/when/how/why will you travel?' 'Where/when/how/why will you travel?'

7) ***feen/?imtaa/?izzaay/leeh** (huwwa) ?illii ha-tsaafir?
 where/when/how/why COP.SGM COMP FUT-travel.2SGM
 'Where/when/how/why is it that you will travel?'

If the correlation between wh-fronting and sluicing holds, we expect EA wh-adjuncts, but not wh-arguments, to appear in sluicing contexts. This is not borne out, however, since both (8) and (9) are equally grammatical.

8) Mona ha-tsaafir bass ma-ʕraf-š **feen/?imtaa/?izzaay/leeh**
 Mona FUT-travel.3SGF but NEG-know.1SG-NEG where/when/how/why
 'Mona will travel, but I don't know where/when/how/why.'

9) Mona bi-tihibb waahid bass ma-ʕraf-š **miin**
 Mona ASP-love.3SGF one but NEG-know.1SG-NEG who
 'Mona loves someone, but I don't know who.'

Since wh-arguments cannot be fronted (4), (9) is unexpected. There is evidence, however, that structures like (9) are *sluicing-like constructions* (SLCs), resulting from a wh-cleft structure that undergoes deletion. Under this **cleft-sluicing** analysis, the wh-phrase is a pivot of a cleft structure, followed by deletion of the rest of the clause under semantic identity with the antecedent clause, as schematically represented in (10); cf. Eid 1983; Ouhalla 1999; Choueiri 2016.

10) [_{Cleft-Clause} miin_i [_{Copular-Clause} ~~Subject-Copula ?illii Mona bi-tihibb-uh_i~~]]

There are several arguments for this analysis. **First**, like wh-cleft structures (3), SLCs may surface with a pronominal copula and/or a demonstrative (11).

11) Mona bi-tihibb waahid bass ma-ʕraf-š **miin (huwwa) (da)**
 Mona ASP-love.3SGF one but NEG-know.1SG-NEG who COP.SGM DEM.SGM
 'Mona loves someone, but I don't know who.'

Second, as in clefts, either the copula or demonstrative receives the pitch accent in SLCs. **Third**, the analysis correctly predicts that wh-PPs appear in both sluicing and cleft-sluicing (12).

12) Mona bi-titkallim maʕa waahid bass ma-ʕraf-š **miin / maʕa miin**
 Mona ASP-talk.3SGF with one but NEG-know.1SG-NEG who / with who
 'Mona is talking with someone, but I don't know who/with whom.'

In sum, EA exhibits genuine sluicing only when wh-fronting is permitted, and cleft-sluicing otherwise, providing evidence for the correlation between sluicing and the wh-syntax of the language.

References cited

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